

The Four Noble Truths

Āsavakkhaya Sutta

Happiness is the main purpose of everyone. Contentment of peace of mind depends on purifying one's mind and understanding the world reality as it is. The Buddha who attained enlightenment discovered the world reality and explained it to the world kindly. He purified his mind completely eradicating all defilements in his mind. The Buddha is neither a God nor a God's messenger. There are no creations or God's messages in his teachings. Whether a Buddha appears or not in the world this world reality is there forever. Therefore the Buddha's message is the truth that anyone can discover (achieve) by his own wisdom. The Buddha's main teaching is the way how to achieve real happiness. According to the Buddha's message, real happiness depends on how far we have overcome the suffering of old age, death and rebirth. On the path of happiness understanding suffering is an essential need. That's is why the Supreme Buddha says that I proclaim to the world in the past and in the present only two things which are suffering and its cessation. Hence the four noble truths which is the great discovery of a Buddha is the main teaching in Buddhism.

In the discourse of *Āsavakkhaya*, the Buddha explains very clearly **"I proclaim the cessation of defilements to who knows the path and who sees the path which is the four noble truths". They are the Suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path that leads to cessation from suffering"**.

“Jānato haṃ, bhikkhave, passato āsavānaṃ khayam vadāmi, no ajānato apassato. Kiñca, bhikkhave, jānato passato āsavānaṃ khayō hoti? ‘Idaṃ dukkhan’ ti, bhikkhave, jānato passato āsavānaṃ khayō hoti, ‘ayaṃ dukkhasamudayo’ ti jānato passato āsavānaṃ khayō hoti, ‘ayaṃ dukkhanirodho’ ti jānato passato āsavānaṃ khayō hoti, ‘ayaṃ dukkhanirodhagāminī paṭipadā’ ti jānato passato āsavānaṃ khayō hoti. Evaṃ kho, bhikkhave, jānato evaṃ passato āsavānaṃ khayō hoti.”

According to Buddhism, the main reasons that we suffer, are desire, anger and delusion. Desire means attachment, craving or lustful desire. Anger means aversion (=hatred). Delusion means the non understanding about the reasons of suffering. Because of these three reasons when the world changes, and when the world is out of our control, we suffer. If we are clever and wise to overcome delusion, severe attachments and anger gradually decrease, because delusion is the main root of all the defilements. Simultaneously, we gradually overcome suffering in this life itself.

The Buddha's message that leads to getting rid of unsatisfactoriness and achieving real happiness is very clear and systematic. Listening to this message is a very rare chance. Today we are able to listen to it because of a lot of merits and blessings that we have done in our previous lives. The sublime truth that the Buddha explained is well expounded (*Svākkhato*), directly visible (*Sanditthiko*), immediately effective (*Akāliko*), calling one to come and see (*Ehipassiko*), leading onwards (*Opanaiko*), to be personally realized by the wise (*Paccattam Veditabbo Viññuhi*). The Buddha's main purpose was to point

out the path of liberation from suffering. If the Buddha has preached any teaching to get rid of suffering, nobody can prove that it doesn't cause to get rid of suffering. According to Buddhism, understanding of suffering and cessation from suffering depend on how far we have achieved intelligence. There are four causes (*Pññāvuddhi Kāranāni*) which help to achieve intelligence (wisdom).

They are;

1. Association of good friends who explain the Buddha's real message (*Sappurisa sansevo*)
2. Listening to the Buddha's Message (*Saddhamma savanam*)
3. Wise Reflection (*Yoniso manasikāro*)
4. Practice (*Dhammānudhamma patipatti*)

If we are able to achieve these four things in our lives, we can develop wisdom and overcome suffering.

At the beginning of the path of liberation, we should have a clear understanding of what we practice and where we go to. That is why the Buddha says; I declare the cessation of suffering to whom who knows and sees the Dhamma. Here understanding of the Dependent Origination (*Patīccasamuppāda*) is very important. Understanding of Buddhism depends on understanding of the Dependent Origination.

He who sees the Dependent Origination sees the Dhamma
(*Yo patīccasamuppādam passati so dhammam passati*)

Ho who sees the Dhamma sees the Buddha
(*Yo dhammam passati so mam passati*)

This is the real way how to see the Dhamma and the Buddha as well.

Understanding of the Dependent Origination causes to understand suffering, and understanding suffering helps to understand the Four Noble Truths which is the main teaching in Buddhism.

The Four Noble Truths

(*Cattāri ariyasaccāni* - චතුරාර්ය සත්‍යය)

The Four Noble Truths, the heart of Buddhism, includes all kinds of doctrines that the Buddha explained to deities and humans in his entire life of 45 years. His main effort was to point out the path of liberation from all kinds of sufferings. The Buddha said very clearly, he preached in the past and present only two things which are suffering and the cessation of suffering. Also all these four things are centered around one thing that is suffering or unsatisfactoriness. If someone can understand only suffering according to the Buddha's advice, he is on the way to realize all four things. As far as he realizes the unsatisfactoriness, he has overcome suffering. They are:

1. The Noble Truth of Dissatisfaction (or Suffering) (*Dukkha ariyasacca* - දුක්ඛ සච්ච)
2. The Noble Truth of Cause (origin) of Dissatisfaction (*Samudaya ariyasacca* - සමුදය සච්ච)
3. The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Dissatisfaction (*Nirodha ariyasacca* - නිරෝධ සච්ච)
4. The Noble Truth of the Path that leads to the cessation of Dissatisfaction (*Magga ariyasacca* - මග්ග සච්ච)

The main goal of every person is happiness. They do all things in their lives in the name of happiness. They learn, do jobs, raise children, earn money and wealth. Even though they do all of them for happiness, they only lose happiness. When they earn and grow their wealth day by day, unfortunately they lose their happiness. The main reason for this situation is they mostly trust in external things such as children, money, education, health, physical appearance, properties. When those things change and go out of control, they worry and they are upset. They think that happiness comes from external things. That is why they fully trust in sensual pleasures. In this situation, the Buddha explains the nature of suffering and how to overcome it to such an ignorant world.

The Buddha pointed out if we suffer about something, the nearest reason is attachment, greed or craving. If we like something greedily, when it changes, when it is out of our control or when someone steals it, we worry, we suffer, and we get angry. If we don't have any attachment, when they change or they are stolen, there is no reason to suffer or get angry. Further, the Buddha explained what the reason for attachment or craving is. It is said as ignorance or delusion. What is the nature of our experience? We receive all experiences in our life through our senses which are eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. When objects such as light, sound, smell, taste, touch on our senses and contact our mind, we have experience the world. The nature of this experience arises and ceases suddenly. After the experience we only have a memory of it. Because of ignorance we think it is still happening even after the experience. When we think about our previous experiences, we suddenly run to the past. This misunderstanding brings us suffering. If we have real knowledge, mindfulness and wisdom to see this reality according to the Buddha's guidance, we are able to overcome suffering. The nearest cause of suffering is craving or desire, but the underlying reason is ignorance which is the inability to see this nature. As the result of understanding this truth, if we can live every moment with mindfulness and intelligence reflecting on impermanence, we can reach real happiness.

When the Buddha explained the four noble truths, he pointed out what we have to do step by step. The very first thing that we should do is that listening to this message with good attention, reflect on it wisely and practice it in our day to day life promptly. According to four steps of the truth, we have to do four things. First we have to understand what unsatisfactoriness is. Then cease its cause. After that we acquire liberation as the result of cessation from unsatisfactoriness. Finally, we practice the path; the Noble Eight-fold path. The very especial thing here is we practice this path with a clear understanding about every step.

1. The Noble Truth of unsatisfactoriness or Suffering (*Dukkha ariyasacca*)

The Buddha explains all kinds of sufferings in this first step. Birth (*jātipi dukkhā*), aging (*Jarāpi dukkhā*), sickness (*Vyādhipi dukkhā*), death (*Maranampi dukham*), union with what is displeasing (*Appiyehisampayogho dukkho*), separation from what is pleasing (*Piyehivippayogho dukkho*) and not to get what one wants are sufferings (*Yampiccham na labhati tampi dukkham*). These are the negative things that we dislike in our life. When they come to our life, we suffer, worry, upset, lament or get angry. All of these sufferings depend on ignorance of five aggregates. Finally It is said as "In brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering" (*Sankhittenapañcupādānakkhandhā*). First seven things

are not difficult to understand as suffering. Anybody, who is wise, can understand as they are suffering. The special reason of suffering, which is never understood without a Buddha's advice, is the five aggregates. Five aggregates are;

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| i. | Matter | (<i>Rupa</i>) |
| ii. | Feelings | (<i>Vedanā</i>) |
| iii. | Perception | (<i>Saññā</i>) |
| iv. | Mental formations | (<i>Sankhāra</i>) |
| v. | Consciousness | (<i>Viññāna</i>) |

When we experience the world through our senses, these five aggregates arise together. They can't be separated. As the result of arising of these five things, we have an experience. These five aggregates suddenly arise and also cease instantly. When we experience something, they have not only arisen but ceased also. When we experience something through our eyes, ears, nose, tongue or body, these five senses can't get pleasure or pain. Those experiences ceased instantly, we experience pleasure or pain in the mind as a past experience. However, we think that we are experiencing in the present because of our ignorance. That is why we suffer. If we can understand that these five aggregates arise and cease at the moment with the conditions, we are able to understand its impermanence. Then we know that we have nothing to desire or hate. It means we have overcome suffering. As far as we have this understanding we have liberated from unsatisfactoriness.

2. The Noble Truth of the cause of unsatisfactoriness (*Samudaya ariyasacca*)

The second step of the four noble truths is the cause of suffering. We are mostly attached to things because of the non understanding of the nature of the five aggregates. If we have a clear knowledge about the five aggregates in our experience, we can get rid of desire or craving which disturb our peace of mind. The Buddha pointed out the nearest reason of suffering as greed. If someone can overcome suffering, he has no anger as well.

3. The Noble Truth of the cessation of unsatisfactoriness (*Nirodha ariyasacca*)

We already know the cause of suffering as greed and the major underlying reason is ignorance or delusion. With this understanding if we can reflect on impermanence, we are able to overcome greed. We have liberated from unsatisfactoriness. Seeing liberation, we enter the path that leads to liberation in the next step.

4. The Noble Truth of the path that leads to the cessation of unsatisfactoriness (*Magga ariyasacca*)

With the full understanding of the above three steps in suffering, the Buddha's disciple enters the path to get rid of suffering. The Buddha explained the path as the noble eight-fold path. As the result of listening to the Buddha's message, our view becomes clear. It is said in Buddhism as 'Right Understanding'.

When we have 'Right Understanding', we don't stop since we have to practice other seven steps too. Then we meet a path to follow 'The Noble Eight Fold Path' –

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| 1. Right Understanding | (<i>Sammā ditthi</i>) |
| 2. Right Intention/ Thoughts | (<i>Sammā samkappa</i>) |
| 3. Right Speech | (<i>Sammā vācā</i>) |
| 4. Right Action | (<i>Sammā kammanta</i>) |
| 5. Right Livelihood | (<i>Sammā ājiva</i>) |
| 6. Right Effort | (<i>Sammā vāyāma</i>) |
| 7. Right Mindfulness | (<i>Sammā sathi</i>) |
| 8. Right Concentration | (<i>Sammā samādhi</i>) |

Here the most important thing that we are compulsory to do is to develop mindfulness. At the very beginning of practicing mindfulness, we have to identify 'the sign of mindfulness' (*Sati nimitta*). By focusing our attention on the tip of our nose or upper lip, we try to practice breathing meditation and later practicing other meditation techniques also we do all our daily activities mindfully. Our success of meditation depends on how far we practice the sign of mindfulness. Every day we have to try to increase the time we practice mindfulness. When we practice this, we can see the result which is happiness. The very important thing in the practice of mindfulness is the visible results. Seeing the results we can go forward on the path getting rid of suffering towards the purification of mind in this short life itself. That is one of the qualities of the Dhamma which is with immediate results (*Akālika*). If we can put this knowledge into practice and get the result, we are the most fortunate people in the world. The reason is that this is the happiest thing out of everything in our life such as money, relatives, education, properties, etc. For that we have to be diligent. We should dedicate our time for that more than we do for other things.

At the very beginning on this spiritual path we should be honest, intelligent and kind. To achieve the final bliss of liberation or enlightenment, we have to listen to the Buddha's message with good attention for our knowledge. At the very first level in Buddhism the knowledge is very important. Buddhism describes knowledge as wealth (*Suta Dhanam*). To achieve all kinds of results such as intelligence that Buddhism teaches, knowledge plays a major role. Only knowledge is not enough but reflecting on it again and again is also very important. Furthermore, we have to practice it in our daily life as morality (*Sila*) and meditation (*Bhāvanā*) to see the results in our life. Meditation is further divided into two as tranquility (*Samatha*) and insight meditations (*Vipassanā*). In short, all doctrines that focus on liberation can be included in three disciplines those are virtue, tranquility and wisdom. This is the way to make a refuge that none can disturb.

May the Triple Gem Bless you!

May all Beings be Well, Happy, Healthy and Peaceful!

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